

Tilley leaves behind legacy of taking care of Soldiers

By Master Sgt. Lisa Hunter

If Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack Tilley looked back over his 35-year career, he would surely notice he's seen more than a few wars, quite a few duty stations, more TDYs and deployments than he can count and thousands of Soldiers whose lives he's touched.

Tilley may be the highest-ranking enlisted Soldier in the Army, but he still sees himself as just a Soldier trying to do his job the best he can. "I'm the senior enlisted guy for 1.3 million enlisted Soldiers. I routinely testify before Congress, affecting Soldiers and family members in the U.S. Army – that includes active, Guard and Reserve," Tilley explains with a shrug, as if it's no big deal. He doesn't even mention that he's also the Army Chief of Staff's right-hand man.

"I had a different expectation of what the SMA's job is," Tilley explained. "I've been a sergeant major forever. I thought this was just another step in the Army. I'll understand all the things that are going on. No, no, no, no. I've seen more of the Army now than I ever thought I would. I now understand what [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] and Congress do."

In his Pentagon office, Tilley doesn't sit behind his highly polished wooden desk. He prefers to sit with his guests around a small table. Dressed in Class Bs and noshing on Red Vines, Tilley's youthful demeanor belies his status as the elder statesman of the NCO Corps. It's one of the few times



he appears to sit still for any length of time.

During his three-and-a-half-year tenure, Tilley has traveled more than 700,000 miles. At nearly every stop, he seems to be refueled from an endless supply of energy. Speaking to Soldiers, he constantly paces, working the whole audience, seemingly giving each Soldier his personal attention. He easily warms up any group – joking, sharing anecdotes and heartfelt stories about his wife. He captivates as he tells them the latest news concerning the “Top Five” — pay, healthcare, housing, quality of life and operations tempo. During the same talk, Tilley imparts to the Soldiers the hard truth that we are a country at war. It’s a statement he punctuates with statistics, the number of Soldiers who have been killed or wounded in the Global War on Terror. He doesn’t read them from a card; they are numbers he doesn’t allow himself to forget.

He can transform an audience – one moment, they are shouting “Hooah”; the next they are somber, mourning lost comrades; and yet a third, they are standing tall infused with the pride Tilley seems to be able to so easily instill in Soldiers.

“I like people. I like to see people smiling and laughing, having fun and joking; and I like doing a hard day’s work for what we’re going to get paid,” Tilley said. “I really like it when I get around a group of Soldiers and they laugh and I laugh. That’s a big deal.

“When I talk to Soldiers, I like to make it an enjoyable event,” he explained. “Laugh a little bit; joke a little bit; and then ask them what bothers them. One of the things that’s important for the Sergeant Major of the Army is to really feel the pulse of the Army – what’s going on and what concerns people. Then, try the best you can to answer questions as you go.”



Photos courtesy of the Office of the Sgt. Maj. of the Army

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack Tilley always loved spending time with Soldiers, be it one-arm push-ups, playing cards or foosball.



Tilley began his career in 1966, enlisting as an armored cavalryman from his hometown in Vancouver, Wash. He fought in Vietnam and had already been promoted to command sergeant major before many of today's young Soldiers were out of grade school. Even so, the 55-year-old veteran still has a strong connection with junior Soldiers.

"A lot of Soldiers look at [senior NCOs] and think, 'You don't remember what it's like to be a [private first class] or a specialist,'" Tilley said. "I'd like to differ with them. I'll never forget what it's like to be a Pfc. or a specialist, because it's hard. It's different conditions now, but it's still hard."

Tilley said he never thought about becoming the Sergeant Major of the Army. In fact, he jokes that his long-range goal was to make "Spec. 4." Tilley emphasized that he's just a Soldier. He was never honor graduate from an Army school and – with the exception of once – he was always promoted in the primary zone. "I'm just a Soldier that tried to do the best I could to get through life," he said.

Tilley attributes his success as a Soldier to being honest, straightforward and thinking positively. "I don't have all the right answers, but I'm smart enough to realize that other people



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack Tilley enlisted in 1971 as an armored cavalryman.

have good answers and I listen to them." Tilley readily admits that success is a group effort. "Nobody is successful by themselves," he said. Tilley attributes his successes as the Sergeant Major of the Army to the strong support of his wife, Gloria, and the six NCOs on his staff.

"The bottom line for a Soldier is at some time in your Army life you may have to take the life of another. That's the bottom line: to protect and defend the United States Constitution,"

Tilley explained. "Taking care of each other means enforcing standards and making sure people are ready to go and do the things they need to do. Don't talk about taking care of Soldiers. Take care of them.

"This is a tough time for the Army. We need to all pull together and take care of each other," he said. Tilley believes that Soldiers can be successful by just doing their jobs. Part of that job is taking care of families and each other.

As Tilley prepares for retirement he is looking forward to moving into his new home in Florida located near a golf course and his granddaughters. He's writing a book on Army development and leadership and contemplating starting his own business. Yet, he is still focused on taking care of Soldiers,



Tilley enjoyed taking time to pose for photos with Soldiers wherever he visited.

encouraging them to speak out by voting and joining private organizations that support and lobby for Soldiers and veterans.

Tilley has certainly left his mark on the Army. His legacy directly relates to his Top Five. “I just want people to know that I tried as hard as I could. It’s not about what you take with you, it’s what you leave behind.”

During his tour as SMA, Soldiers have received more than 20 percent in pay raises. For the first time in Army history, a sergeant major earns more than a captain. He’s advocated improving quality of life and educating Soldiers and family members about TRICARE. He also supported educating Soldiers about their retirement benefits and financial planning during NCO Education System (NCOES) courses. Tilley established the Department of the Army-level Soldier and NCO of the Year competition and gave his full support to revamping the *NCO Journal*.

Even with all this, Tilley is still greatly concerned about the Army’s high operations tempo and its impact on families, safety and NCOES.

“You look at 330,000 Soldiers forward deployed at 120 different locations and 150,000 Reserve Soldiers that have been activated. There’s a tremendous amount of stress that’s placed on Soldiers and family members [today],” Tilley

explained. “Even something as small as taking a 30-day leave has been very tough to pull off. Soldiers coming back from the [deployments] are only getting two-weeks leave.

“I think right now that the United States Army is the workhorse of our nation. Everybody ought to be very proud to serve in the United States Army and to be an American. You ought to stand up straight and be proud of who you are.”

Even now, as Tilley hangs up his uniform for the last time, concluding 35 years of distinguished service, Tilley admits that the Army will always be a part of his life. But as he prepares to step into another phase of his life, he’s still up for a rousing game of ping pong or challenging a Soldier to one-armed push-ups. He still gets excited when he talks about Soldiers and even more so when he interacts with them.

“One of the biggest compliments I’ve gotten was when a specialist at a [Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers] conference stood up and said, ‘Sergeant Major, I just want to thank you for what you’ve done.’ That’s a big deal,” Tilley explained. “That means you’ve gotten down to the level in the Army that’s really hard to get to.”

And young Soldiers the Army over now know what the Sergeant Major of the Army does – thanks to Tilley.

